

Supporting Distributed Operations from the Company Level
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to
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*"A real knowledge of supply and movement factors must be the basis of every leader's plan; only then can he know how and when to take risks with those factors, and battles are won by taking risks."*¹

- Napoleon

The current operating environment justifies the need for distributed operations. As the long term and short term situation evolve, operational and logistical techniques must also evolve to prevent forces from reaching their culminating point at the most critical time in an operation. The combat logistics capability to sustain distributed operations (DO) should reside with the company commander conducting DO because supporting DO in a complex environment requires the appropriate perspective; proper task organization; and effective logistics tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

Background

The primary tenants of distributed operations (DO) as defined by the Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC)² are the following:

- Intentional dispersion of forces
- Unit separation beyond the limits of mutual support
- DO is a technique
- METT-TSL dependant
- Interdependent small unit actions

The tenants of DO, as identified above, are enduring throughout the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare. They have implications throughout the logistical pipeline and at all levels of command.

The Marine Corps has been wrestling with the technology and training problem sets associated with the DO concept. Current initiatives and projects at Marine Corps Systems Command (MARCORSYSCOM) and Training and Education Command (TECOM) which focus on small unit leadership training and enhanced equipment capabilities are making considerable headway in development of the DO concept; however, the logistical puzzle to this initiative hinges on the distribution techniques and capabilities at the tactical level. At this point, the Marine Corps has not specifically formulated how logisticians are going to support companies, platoons and squads beyond the limits of mutual support.

Appropriate Perspective

The combat logistics capability to sustain DO should reside with the company commander who chooses to employ the DO technique because supporting DO in a complex environment requires the appropriate perspective. It is important to understand different perspectives and the implications placed on the GCE and LCE when required to sustain DO units. The ground combat element (GCE) and logistics combat element (LCE) of the marine air ground task force (MAGTF) contain specific organizational capabilities that enable or hinder their supportability, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for

distribution used by the GCE and LCE. Ultimately, examining different perspectives will assist planners in understanding why the primary ability to sustain DO platoons and squads should be under the direct control of the company commander.

The LCE Perspective

Optimists who claim that the LCE can effectively support a company level distributed force will use the current operating environment in Iraq as a success story. Iraq's non-contiguous battlespace consists of advanced communications architecture, trafficable lines of communication, and forward positioning of resources in close proximity to forces. Our lessons learned and experience coupled with a logistically mature theater enable the systematic identification of requirements and planned execution of logistical support to distributed units; however, from the LCE's perspective, DO would not be so easily supported in a more linear, and less mature battlespace.

Operational tempo can increase and decrease relatively quickly; therefore, sustainment is pre-planned and pre-positioned forward in secure locations, thereby providing the supported unit the necessary capacity to adapt to the changing tempo with little impact on MAGTF level logistics operations. In Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) 05-07, from September 06 through February 07, "90% of re-supply mission were conducted on

a 72-96 hour planning cycle with the exception of conducting recovery missions.”³

By viewing the MAGTF as a whole, the LCE focuses on providing an uninterrupted flow of sustainment and has a limited ability to flex if required to conduct an unrelated mission to support a DO unit (squad, platoon) or multiple DO units. Opponents would argue the LCE is capable of directly supporting DO units; however, performing such isolated actions can have second and third order effects on the overall MAGTF sustainment plan.

Friction in the LCE resulting from unfiltered requests (via direct line from a DO unit) can increase exponentially and affect the whole MAGTF if support requirements are not addressed through the supported commander's own agencies. Information management systems enable the LCE to receive and process requests, prioritize, and task their distribution agencies for execution. Requests for support have or should have been filtered for redundancy and prioritized by the supporting unit. A misplaced request or misplaced priority will prove costly (time, asset and mission preparation) to a multiple unit distribution mission. Prioritization within the LCE of unfiltered requests from distributed units against other

MAGTF requirements are beyond the LCE's capacity to manage and support.

The GCE Perspective

As the LCE is mostly blue force oriented, the GCE Commander is otherwise focused on the enemy and task organizing DO units to disrupt, interdict, or defeat enemy forces. The commander will leverage any and all assets at his disposal to provide maximum combat power and organic assets to support his decisive action. If DO is the technique the commander feels will best complete the mission, the logistical focus at this point is to use knowledge of stockage and asset readiness levels in order to adapt a sustainment plan that will neither disrupt operational tempo or prevent forces from maintaining the initiative.

Some commander's may feel that having additional logistics capability translates to a larger footprint, thereby reducing mobility and increasing the likelihood of enemy targeting. Conversely, the increased capacity of a unit's organic logistic capability will extend the relative duration of DO against a distributed enemy force. In the current non-contiguous battlespace of Iraq, a 96-hour planning cycle is feasible due to the relative location of organic logistical capability and the DO units operating at limited distances for a limited duration. During offensive operations in a more linear battlespace, a

wholesale 96-hour planning cycle is not realistic. Effective and efficient use of organic logistics assets to support a DO unit correlates directly with the commander's capacity for contingency planning, situational understanding and training coupled with the appropriate personnel and equipment to execute an immediate support plan.

Proper Task Organization

The combat logistics capability to sustain DO should reside with the commander who chooses to employ the DO technique because supporting DO in a complex environment at the company level requires proper task organization. Unless a LCE is attached to a rifle company or is in direct support of an assigned company, a misinterpretation of time/space, supported unit standard operating procedures (SOP's), link up procedures and, most importantly, an intimate understanding of the current situation is more likely to result in last minute scrambles for information. Introducing an outside unit into an already turbulent situation in this manner can make a complex situation all that more dangerous for the blue force, as indicated in an after-action Report (AAR) from the 1st Marine Logistics Group (MLG) compiled by the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL):

"We had blue on blue multiple times... they fired two TOW missiles at us. We tried to communicate with them more and make them aware that we were coming through... sometimes it just didn't get through."⁴

Current operations and future operations will require the increased organizational structure or attachment of logistics enablers to sustain DO beyond the limits of mutual support. As per the table of organization mission statement for a Marine rifle company, logistics capability consists of operator maintenance on all organic equipment and does not stockpile supplies nor has the necessary organic mobility. Some may argue that increasing equipment capability enables the infantry battalion/company to conduct DO. The Marine Corps has enhanced the infantry battalion's table of equipment to increase mobility, observation, internal/external communications, direct fire capability, and navigation; however, efforts have yet to address skill-sets necessary for companies to logistically support their own DO units. The focus in this endeavor, concurrent with the advances in technology, should be to provide companies with the appropriate personnel and training necessary to perform logistics as a warfighting function at the company level. Given the right tools, commanders can disperse their units with confidence that they will be unhindered by a lack of organic logistics capability.

Effective Tactics, Techniques and Procedures

The combat logistics capability to sustain DO should reside with the commander who chooses to employ the DO technique because conducting DO in a complex environment at the company level requires effective TTPs. The DO technique, without question, will stretch the creativity and resourcefulness of all logisticians involved; however, most of the effective TTP's should be focused on enabling the commander to effectively support his DO units. Appropriate identification of immediate support requirements, prioritization, re-sourcing and execution can most aptly be completed at the S-4 level. The unit S-4 has the most complete situational understanding, battle space familiarization, and realistic understanding of unit requirements. Given the right mix of logistics training at the company level and personnel/equipment to extend self sustainability, the battalion commander can direct the focus of all warfighting functions to ensure his DO units are supported through his own personally vetted agent, his S-4.

Logisticians need to do more than identify command relationships as "habitual" in nature. If the Marine Corps does not desire to increase the organic logistics capability of the infantry battalion, LCE units should be task organized to directly support the company commander conducting DO. If the DO unit is the commander's bid for success, then organic units

(other rifle squads/platoons) must be considered as viable options for assisting with logistical support. Adjacent unit resource pull (personnel/equipment/supplies) must be anticipated if transitioning into distributed operations. If, the adjacent unit may be the closest in proximity to effectively re-supply the DO unit effectively, the commander must consider an adjacent unit as a primary option for re-supply.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of OIF, logisticians around the Marine Corps have endeavored to improve their practices and proficiency astride the advances in tactics and technology. Logisticians have learned "the hard way" a great deal and have become extremely proficient in the current operating environment. The task organization, capabilities and flexibility of a combat logistics battalion (CLB) is a proven and effective organization. The CLB has, on several occasions, directly supported platoons and squads with critical sustainment and maintenance support. Task organized provisional security elements and transportation elements have been extremely effective in ensuring uninterrupted support to the various Forward Operating Bases (FOB) and combat outposts. Unfortunately, mission consolidation and economic use of assets lead to large movements, extensive coordination between supporting and supported units, and increased threat to enemy attacks.

Regardless of the LCE's tenacity and perseverance to accomplish the mission, if required to support DO units directly for immediate re-supply, the LCE will be unable to support with the same responsiveness as the company commander if he had a secure organic logistics capability. Logistically supporting the DO concept requires a balancing act between merging combat logistics capabilities and responsibilities amongst the GCE and LCE. Despite the technological advances in tactical communications architecture and information management, the time/space required to cover lines of communication to the farthest unit must still be traversed. In consonance with the development of a unit's other warfighting capabilities at the company level, a logistics capability should not be the exception but at the forefront of those efforts to ensure DO are successful.

1887 words

Notes

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